


i magazine



i

1990

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rain
like these tears
falling
in the bittersweet
cold gray beginning
not yet spring
though winter has
taken her blanket of white
and left me here
alone
listening
in the dark
on the edge
of something new
smiling.

Dona O'Dou

The Shops

The shops.

For as long as Paul LeBlanc could remember, he had always dreaded the shops, local factories which imprisoned the men and women of smalltown America and robbed them of their loves. For whatever reasons of their own, these people cut short their hopes and dreams and voluntarily became drones, lured into employment by the promise of big bucks to be earned there, along with unequalled fringe benefits. There were benefits such as an excellent funeral plan in the event of an unfortunate accident. It was only after they had slaved away several years that some of these people, not all, finally realized the predicaments and limitations of the situation they were stuck in. Not that they couldn't get out. They could, Paul figured, if they wanted to. But most of them didn't. They stayed. They stayed and toiled laboriously day in and day out for fifty-five, or sixty years of their lives, whether they were happy or not. And before they knew it their lives, what they would rather have done with them, and their unfulfilled dreams had passed them by. Lost. Eaten up in the non-stop grinding of the machinery they had operated for years.— the machinery most of them could, perhaps, operate mindlessly in their sleep by that time.

Having watched his father go through this routine grind for years, listening to his regular evening gripe sessions at the dinner table, and sensing that his father was obviously less than satisfied, Paul could never understand why someone would stay for so long in such a situation and not try to get out. He struggled with this conflict for awhile until he found what he considered a reasonable answer. It was in his senior year at high school. The subject of study had become boring in his sociology class when he struck up a conversation with his best friend, Frank Leroux. Frank had observed that once a person got used to the 400 or 500 dollar paycheck every week, that person proceeded to go comfortably into debt knowing that his position was secure for all intended purposes. He had no intentions of leaving. Even if that person wanted to get out, after a certain amount of time had passed it would begin to seem almost impossible that another job would be found for the same rate of payment, let alone a job where that person would, indeed, be happy. Not only that, Frank claimed that person would be so used to a certain lifestyle based on income earned that he would be afraid to leave and start anew somewhere else for fear of losing it. Paul accepted this as a plausible explanation. Somewhat, anyway. He still couldn't believe people would willingly continue in such conditions.

After seeing his father and grandfather taken in, Paul vowed not to follow in their footsteps. He wasn't going to throw his life and his dreams away. He often felt a faint hint of guilt when he thought this way. After all, he didn't want to put down his family, but he couldn't quietly accept what they had done to themselves either. Many times this caused major arguments at the dinner table during his high school years. His father ranted on about how "this family would have been nothing if not for my work at the shop."

To this, and other empty remarks made in defense of the shop, Paul once asked, "What do you owe that place anyway? It's never given you anything! Only taken! You can bet I'll never waste away in that shithole."

As he was about to leave the kitchen, his father grabbed him by the arm and whipped him around violently. He then laid into him with a rage that Paul had not seen the likes of before.

"So I've wasted my life? What the hell are you going to do with yourself?! Sure, you'll go to college, but then what?! Unh?! You'll be right back here working a five day work week just like myself, and just like your brothers! You're no better."

Paul pulled away from his father in anger. "Never!" Then more calmly and confidently as he walked away, "Never," he said again.

It was after this conflict, that Paul realized another reason why people went to the shops: they were made to believe they could never do better. Because their parents had made a life of the shops, they would, no doubt, also be destined for a life term.

But it was after this, also, that Paul finally saw the real reason behind his father's anger. It wasn't Paul's disenchantment with the factory, it was his father's own regret for not doing better himself. Paul never mentioned it to his father. Christ, that would have been like asking for a beating. Paul knew his father would never lay a hand on him. But he could see that his father wished his life could be changed, though he wished it silently.

Paul figured his father fell into the shops because of his grandfather. Even so, Paul always understood his grandfather's reasoning far more than his father's. His grandfather had come down from Canada two generations before in search of work and stability for his family. Like many other French-Canadians immigrating at the time, he took what was immediately available. There was no time for personal choice. There had been hard times and an immense amount of unemployment. And his grandfather feared unemployment and poverty as much as Paul dreaded the shops. Paul would do better for himself. He had to. He would not be able to face life in the factory if it came to that.

He had first promised himself a better life than that which the shops offered when he was around five or six. It was at this age that Paul started accompanying his mother when she picked his father up after work, just like his brothers had done when they were that young. The first time of actually seeing the unfeeling mechanism of industry where their father spent his days, Paul remembered.

Paul would watch anxiously from the car as the people streamed from the doors like herds of cattle let loose after being fenced in for days and not allowed to run freely. They had the energy to run, but in their eyes one could sense that their spirit had deadened. Then, finally, his father would emerge through the door and separate from the crowd as he spotted the car. He always had a smile on his face. Glad to get out and breathe. Glad to see his family. What he saw of them, that is.

Three hours a night during the week. Enough time to eat, clean up, watch news or read the paper, and go to bed: he never saw them really. It was as if the factory had stolen their father from Paul and his brothers. And he resented the shop for that fact.

As time went on and Paul continued to go with his mother, he noticed his father changing. He no longer was smiling. The time he put in this place had now taken its toll. And Paul noticed his eyes were now distant like the others who worked there. He also noticed a difference in his hands. They were dried and cracked and they no longer came clean as easily. The thick, black oil which he worked with had stained his hands like the numbers that mark a man on the back of a prison uniform.

Paul hadn't yet decided on a college when graduation rolled around, and besides, he wasn't in any hurry to go. He had just completed twelve years of schooling and needed a breather. He would get a job for a year or two and live a little. There wasn't much available, however; it was reminiscent of his grandfather's days. Small towns are like that, though, he thought as he searched, confining in their qualities. If one didn't keep one's optimism, it would only be worse.

After about a month of endless job hunting, Paul had reluctantly decided to accept a full-time job at a local wood shop. Assembling tables. An easy job. The place wasn't incredibly large by any standards, no bigger than a fair-sized farm barn and easily escapable when the time came. That time would be when he had the money for college saved, or, at least, part of it. He could always apply for a grant or loan. This shop wasn't like the larger factories such as the Tool and Die plant where his father and brothers worked.

Telling his father about the job was the only hard part. He would surely rub it in. But his father made no remarks at all. In fact, they hadn't discussed the shops since the time when Paul had referred to the Tool and Die as a shithole.

The work was easy at first and Paul didn't mind it at all. In fact, he considered it quite a novelty. Almost like I.A. class in school. A couple of other guys who had graduated before him, as well as Frank, were working here and it was more of a jokingly fun atmosphere than the dark images he had held of the shops.

But as time passed, he found himself falling more and more into the routine of the people who worked at the larger shops. One day at lunch, he confronted Frank about his concerns.

"Hey, Frank, how long are you planning on staying here?"

"I don't know, why do you ask?"

"Well, a year here so far is a year too long, don't you think?"

"You gotta do something, don't you? Even if you go to college, you gotta have money."

"Yeah, but what about all the times we talked about not letting ourselves fall into the shop grind."

Frank didn't answer at first. He sat quietly for a moment. "Well, it's not permanent by any means. But, it's not bad for now. I can live with it."

Paul said nothing further. He had heard all of that crap before from his brothers. But they were well on their ways to making careers for themselves at the Tool and Die. All he knew was that he had let himself get caught in the trap he warned himself that he wouldn't be caught in. And now he had to get out.

Paul was retrieving a pallet load of parts for the assembly area a week later. The storage room was a damp, musty pit due to that fact the shop sat near the main river winding through the town. It was more a hole than a cellar. Even more like solitary confinement, Paul thought as he pulled the load into motion.

"Hey, son, need a hand?"

The old man startled him. Though he knew the man's office was down in this area, he never saw him much. He was one of the maintenance men employed here, retired from the Tool and Die and just passing his last years keeping busy. Paul thought of him as an old fool, going from one shop to the next during a time when he should be enjoying life or what was left of it for the old man.

He was sickly looking and, except for the gray hair, his eyes and hands were characteristic of Paul's father's. That fact grabbed his attention momentarily as he pictured his father standing before him and he felt sick.

"I say, son, need a hand?"

"Sure, Eddie," Paul replied cautiously.

The man began helping Paul move the pallet towards the elevator. As they proceeded, the old man, Eddie, kept up the conversation.

"What the hell are you doing here, son?"

Paul was caught off guard. "Excuse me," he said, half catching Eddie's words.

"I said, 'What in the hell are you doing here?' " Eddie exclaimed with irritation entering his voice.

"What do you mean? Money, I guess."

"I mean, why don't you do something with your life before you ain't got one and this is your life?"

Paul fell quiet as he shoved the load into position on the elevator platform. His own words were echoing back to him through this old man and it unsettled him. After working here a year, a year which hardly seemed a year, he had found how easy it was to become trapped in the shops. He already had a few small bills which he realized could easily be inflated. If he wasn't careful, he would have to be here longer than anticipated. Long enough even to ...; he suddenly saw himself in the old man's shoes, and he saw Frank.

"Never," he whispered.

"That's what I said when I first went to the Tool and Die." Eddie pulled the door down and pressed the up button. "This old thing is gonna kill someone someday." Eddie stared at Paul with cold, forboding eyes. "It could be you. Then you'd never get out of here."

Paul watched uneasily as the elevator creaked slowly upwards and shuddered violently as it stopped. Paul was becoming irritated with Eddie and his commentary on his life and he ripped back at him in revenge. "Yeah, and it could be you. If you weren't already dead! The Tool and Die killed you a long time ago."

Then, it happened.

Paul first heard about it when he got to work that morning. Frank told him excitedly, but with nervousness in his voice. Old Man Eddie had been killed. He had arrived an hour earlier than usual and was working on the old elevator, trying to fix it so no one would get injured. While he was testing it, a cable, or gear, or something, gave way and it crashed back down. Eddie had been too close and the right side of his skull was struck. He died of multiple fractures and contusions to the head.

Paul said nothing, but wasted no time in cleaning his work area of all personal belongings. College was waiting, his life was waiting. He had already wasted enough time here. He certainly wasn't going to die here.

The Tool and Die, the shops in general had claimed the old man long ago and now they had finished the job. But Paul was beating them to the final punch. He was finishing them before they finished him. It was the final reason he found to abandon the shops for what he knew them to be.

Brian Gelinas

8:15 A.M., I
dance and bleed in the kitchen
to Neil Young. I
smash every plate
but one, and
bend every fork but
one
and I know the whore next door
has more sense.

Susan O'Neill

For Michael 1977

they're waiting out there, those
shining, happy people.
deleirious, she said.
waiting.
but here —
here, oh God, let me
be doing the right thing.
all your little fingers
curl around my smallest one, I
touch my lips and nose to your
velvet forehead,
my cheek against yours.
I took off all your clothes and
all of mine.
holding you to my
chest and stomach
I need the closeness
before I let you go.
I love you
I love you
please by happy, Michael.

Susan O'Neill

Throwing Grass to an Astral Dog.

You barked at me
as I weeded the flower garden
next to the fence where you were tied.
I stuck my finger in the wire
and you daintily mouthed it.
I threw the weeds over the chain link
and you caught them in midair,
snapping them into green mush.
It was our game, yours and mine.

We let you loose after supper
and you fetched an old rolled-up sock
for long after we tired of the play.
Bozo the clown, we called you.
(Loud mouth dog, pain in the neck,
sidewalk singer ...)
We loved you like a touched old uncle
home from the war.

One day we raced out
to the yard
amid the clamour and commotion
of other dogs,
and found you dying ...
We tried to call you back to us,
but you were gaming in another realm.

A freak accident, it was.

"Life is so fragile ..." said I,
shaking my head,
inadequately.

Under a stand of hemlocks,
a granite boulder marks your grave.
On the pointed top of that rock now rests
the instrument of your death.

We grieved, and accused ourselves
of not being fast enough,
clear-headed enough,
foresightful enough
to cut the collar,
perfect enough ...

"I still keep thinking that if only I'd ..."
my mother said,
so many times later.

"One minute you're alive, and the next you're dead," said I,
so many times later ...

Yesterday I went out to weed the flower garden.
The silence was alien, disquieting, unkind.
I plucked the grass and automatically tossed it over the fence.
It hit the roof of your empty house.
Thunk.
I turned to look, and then remembered.

In my mind's eye, you'd never left.
I smiled and threw another clump over the fence.
I imagined you catching it with a snap
that turned it into green mush ...
but it lay there, in spite of my wishing,
uprooted grass on the ground
still bare from the padding of your big feet.

I grabbed another tuft and shook loose the soil,
sent that one over too,
and watched it fall.
"You're there,
aren't you?
You goofy mutt ..."

I stuck my finger in the fence.
The digit in my mind's eye remembered the feel of wet slobbery lips.

Yes.
But free now.
Untethered.
An astral dog catching grass ...

L.E Dupill

The Finger

We never talk about it. I mean we did. That is talk about it. When it first happened. Maybe for a week, or two. Possibly three.

It was a dark thing. Still is. Dark things are not meant, do not belong in a child's summer.

As children we didn't understand that. As adults we do. At least I do.

It is July of 1971. I am eight years old. I'm with, who I'm always with. Mikey and Ernie.

Oppressive.

Hot.

Sticky.

It's like breathing peanut butter. Or walking through it.

We are out behind Currie's house. In the field. Lying around. Eating Oreo cookies. I'm eating the cream. They're eating the cookies. Sticking their tongues out at me with chewed-up black stuff on them. I'm forcing the cream out between my teeth. Just being gross and junk.

It's great.

It's summer.

It's us.

"Let's go down the tunnels," says Mikey.

"Yeah," I say, rolling over onto my back.

I've got brand new P.F. Flyers on. Puce blue. I feel really cool. The tunnels will be the best place to try them out. You know for speed. Jumping ability. Important stuff like that.

"You know we're not supposed to go down there," Ernie says.

We have to talk Ernie into everything. Because he's just really good, and really scared shitless of his mother. It's like he's an adult, and we've got to make him be a kid once-in-awhile.

"Aw, Ern, we can go swimming afterwards," I say. "Besides who's gonna know?"

"Let's go," says Mikey.

We get up and start walking. Knowing Ernie will be following along behind us shortly.

We stop at my house.

Get a flashlight.

Coffee can for junk we find.

Purple juice in a canteen.

Cap guns.

My dad's pen-knife.

We proceed down the street. Shooting at each other. Cramming cookies down our throats.

The tunnels are huge sewer pipes that run into the reservoir at the end of our street.

Our parents don't want us down there. They tell us it's because they don't want us to drown in the water. But now I think it had a lot to do with the tunnels.

There are miles of tunnels. We know them well. We've spent most of the summer exploring them. They're dark and cool. They smell kind of bad.

Perfect place for monsters, I'd think. If monsters existed. That summer,

that day. I found out. That monsters were real. Because monsters really did live in the tunnels.

Mikey always goes first. Into the tunnels. His reasoning being that he's black. I mean really black. He can see "stuff" before they or it can see him first. In the dark. In the tunnels. That way we can make a quick get-a-way if we have to.

I'm in the middle.

Ernie, being Ernie, is always last.

We slide down the embankment.

We go into the tunnels.

We've walked a good ways in.

Ten minutes in anyway.

When all of a sudden.

"J— C—!"

It wasn't a yell. It wasn't really said. Or whispered. It was breathed out.

"What?" I ask.

"There's a f— finger here," says Mikey.

It's the first time I've ever heard any of us swear. So I kind of really believe him. I'd like to think he's just goofing. But I believe him.

"I'm leavin'," says Ernie.

I turn around and grab him by the back of his shorts.

"You're not goin' anywhere, Ernie."

I'm holding him really tight by his arm now.

"Let's see," I say

Mikey puts the flashlight on it.

"J— C—," now I breathe. "It really is a finger."

"I'm going to throw-up," says Ernie.

"Shut-up, Ernie," we both say to him, at the same time.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Well, what are we gonna do?"

"We're gonna take it outta here."

"O.K., Mike."

Mikey crouches down, and pushes the finger into the coffee can with the lid.

We turn, and man, I don't know if it was me, the situation, or the P.F. Flyers, but I never got out of a place faster than I got out of the tunnels that day.

We are sitting in a circle.

On the banks of the rezzy.

The finger is in the can.

In the middle.

Of the circle.

"O.K. what do we do?" I ask. I'm looking at Mikey. Right into his eyes.

"I'm telling my mom," says Ernie. His mouth is all trembly. His eyes watery.

"Ernie," I get quite exasperated with him sometimes. I really do. It's hard not to.

"Because, because if you do we're in some big trouble. We're not supposed to be down here in the first place!" I say, rather sharply.

Then I look at him. I mean really stop and look at him. I finally understand how scared he is. How scared I am.

"O.K." Softly, I touch his arm. "O.K., Ernie."

There's one thing that bothers me, more than anything else. The fact is I'm really excited. Stuff like this doesn't happen all that often.

"We really got to think about this," says Mikey.

"Yeah," I whisper. "Yeah."

He opens the can.

Dumps the finger on the ground.

We all stare at it.

It's a grown-up's finger.

It's very, very white.

It has got black curley hairs on the knuckle of it.

Ernie backs off.

Throws-up. Everywhere.

I eat an Oreo cookie, absentmindedly.

I look at Mikey. He's got his finger up his nose.

It's getting hotter and hotter.

I take off my clothes and dive into the water.

We carry the finger around.

In a Maxwell House Coffee can.

For a couple of days.

Then we bury the thing.

Sure.

The finger is buried.

Physically.

But.

I just don't know.

So we talk about it.

For awhile.

Mostly telling each other not to tell anyone else.

That's about it.

Except.

That to this day, I must confess,

I'm always looking. Always. At people's hands. For someone missing a finger.

I still know where it's buried.

After eighteen years.

They remember too. I know it.

It has been ten years, anyways, since I last saw Mikey or Ernie.

They call me.

Every so often.

I might need them.

They might need me.

We talk.

About almost everything.

Except, that summer.

We know.

That's enough.

Teresa Brown

It cried in the open dawn
as it approached.
I pulled the curtains
to feel piano tingles
as my eyes drifted
across the dew laden thicket.
Its shadow opened onto
a worn path,
up to the closed gate
and around, under, through
grinding to the whisper
of the morning breeze.
My finger tapped shallow
on the final keys. Thinking.
The window feet away,
the gate farther still.
My boots still damp
from last night's hay.
I gaze, I listen.
The floor hisses under
my weight with grain-full
pail in hand.
All I ever wanted to be
was a poet.

Tammy Armstrong

She's Gone

Emotions trashed
Yet my heart's not broken just fractured
The smoke has cleared
The blizzard's over tears subside
A part of me is gone a part remains
Me in her and her in me
A part given A part saved
A part of me dies another grows
Emotions now stable not fragments but whole
I've learned a lot ... learned to love
I'll always remember her
she'll always be important to me
My heart a little fuller
full of life now
Inside ...
 gentle moments
 Forever I'll cherish
My life ...
 more than before
yet still ...
 she's gone

Scott Alisauskas

The Best Part of Summer

It's August. You know, one of those nights when you can't sleep 'cause the humidity is making you sweat to death. Every dust particle in this tiny apartment is now stuck to my body. I can't even think anymore 'cause I've just spent the last two months baking in the sun and my brain just stopped functioning. I don't even know when it happened.

And just when I think I'm gonna go crazy I feel this wildly exciting, cool breeze float in through my window and I know what's coming. The best part of Summer — a storm.

Heat lightning randomly lights up the sky. A crackle here — a flash there. A rumble or two of thunder in the distance. I heard a storm would be rolling in tonight and I don't know, but it's something about thunder — it really does sound like it's rolling. And when the sky is lit up with lightning I can see the storm clouds rolling in too.

I lift up the screen. I can't get close enough to this storm. I close my eyes, wanting only to listen.

When I open them I see that the electricity on Main Street has gone out. The lower street lights come on — casting a silent, fluorescent glow on this old street and making it look soft and new.

The rain comes. Softly each drop lands on the town. Warm breezes blow the moisture in through my window and onto me. It feels good — cooling me off. My mind clears for the first time in months. I can think. Everything is so clear ... and real.

I watch the storm awhile, loving every flash of light and low rumble of thunder. I close my eyes, letting the breezes lift me out of my tiny world. Leaving it all behind, I just float around in my memories. Seeing this town as I saw it ten years ago. Seeing life as I saw it ten years ago.

I don't ever want to come back. The storm moves on, though, rolling out of sight. And now I can't see it or hear it anymore.

I know tomorrow will be here soon, clogging my mind again with its humidity. But it doesn't matter 'cause this storm has left behind a cool, clear dampness that lingers on all night.

Donna Gebo

The Challenge

"Are you daring me?" Ida-Mae stood her ground and shouted.

"Yeah, I'm betting that you're too scared to ride through ... the Underpass."

A hush of silence hung over the group of children. Every kid in the county knew of the Haunted Underpass that ran along the church graveyard. Old men who sat in front of Jenkin's General Store would weave tales for the children who gathered around the old, red, Coca Cola freezer every Friday night. The children would munch on fire balls, rock candy, orange popsicles, potato chips, and other sugary and malty concoctions that would have their mothers fuming and the dentist smiling. Old Jake had the best stories about ghosts, demons, and goblins. There was the faceless Union soldier who kept guard at the graveyard entrance. The ghost of Miss Lullen who was left standing at the altar on her wedding day. "Listen children," Jake's deep and gravely voice would say, "She went right then and there plum crazy! Next day they found her in a broken heap below Morgan bridge. Folks said she had a strange, crazy smile on her face that even the undertaker could not remove. The next day her people buried her, in her wedding dress, smile and all. Well, days went by like days before, then in the darkness of a new day, a cry broke the silence. It was a cry that was no ways earthly ... but to young men folk who dared to travel near the graveyard it sounded like an angel singing. Miss Lullen would try to lure them to enter the church with her, and thereby release her soul to heaven or to hell and doom them to walk the graveyard grounds until they could find a bride to enter the church with them so they could be released from Miss Lullen's terrible curse." But the best of the old tales was of the Underpass. Not only would ghosts haunt the darkened walls of the tunnel but demons and goblins. Young eyes would widen; gasps of breath, being held then released only to be held again, traveled among the children. These specters of the night would collect souls like marbles or baseball cards. It was said if you are good of heart and soul, you could stroll through the Underpass without fear. And if you are not sure of the status of your soul you could try to outrun the demons and apparitions who dwelled there.

Teddy Whitmore waited for Ida-Mae's response. He smiled with a certainty that she would back down. All the girls backed down. He was betting that she did not have the guts that most ten year old boys did not have. The warm Carolina sun began to sink slowly down, setting the red clay soil ablaze. Night would soon follow. Ida-Mae had been hoping for a fight, but not this, not the Underpass. Old Jake's stories echoed in her mind. She looked around to see how many heard the challenge. More than twelve kids surrounded them. Teddy smirked confidently. Ida-Mae wanted to wipe that smile of his off his face with her fist! There was no choice but ride or look like a chicken. She unconsciously tugged at the sashes on her blue school dress and then let them fall back to her side. "Well?" Teddy said. Then he began to cluck and scratch the ground with his well worn black sneakers, mimicking a chicken for the benefit of his friends. Ida-Mae calmly and quickly braided one of her loosened braids, and when she was finished she grabbed her green and white bicycle from the ground and in a calm voice and said, "I'm ready to ride ... are you?" She got on her bike and headed toward the church yard and the Underpass, followed by old and new admirers. Teddy followed too, still stunned that she had accepted the challenge. They said Ida-Mae was crazy and now he regretted making the dare.

From the church yard "Tombstone" Barley, the old grounds keeper, watched from the roof of the shed he was repairing. He chuckled to himself as the group of children on bikes or on foot grew bigger and bigger. How many times he had witnessed the same scene of children trying to prove to themselves who is the bravest by riding through the Underpass? He had lost count. He merely made himself comfortable by putting down his hammer, scratching the back of his neck which was always itchy, and then pulled out his lunch pail to have supper and watch the show.

Stomachs turned and knees shook as the riders readied themselves for the darkening entrance of the Underpass. Teddy and Ida-Mae tried to look cool and confident, but their minds were recalling every bad thing they did — snitching peaches and berries from Miss Washington's garden, once in a while writing answers to a spelling test on their hands, and so much more. The list in their minds went on and on. Each offense seemed worse than the one before. The group of children divided themselves into two groups, one at the entrance the other at the exit. Pee-Wee Huchkins adjusted his glasses which always had smudges and fingerprints on them. He lifted a stick that had a white strip of cloth tied at the end of it. A hush of silence came over the children. Only the warm Indian Summer breeze stirring the dead leaves could be heard. Pee-Wee's voice broke the air with, "Ya'll ready?" The two riders nodded a yes. The boy with the flag swallowed hard then shouted so all could hear.

"Get ready!"

Ida-Mae from the corner of her eye gave Teddy a quick glance.

"Get set!"

Teddy also gave a quick look at Ida-Mae face, which appeared to him cool and calm. He gripped the handle bars of the bike a little more tighter and envisioned himself going into the mouth of the tunnel.

Pee-Wee took a deep breath, held it for a second, then released the word "Go!"

Legs pumped, bikes rattled over the rough ground. Ida-Mae entered the world of terror and fear. A small cry escaped her lips as her eyes took for demon's and goblin's arms and legs the dead and twisting vines that grew along the darkened walls. An owl's hoot made her pedal even faster. Then from the corner of her eyes she saw two deformed limbs trying to reach for her. She rode faster and faster, but the demon hands were still only one inch from collecting her soul. Her eyes caught hold of the red glow of the sun at the end of the long tunnel. Ida-Mae on her green and white bike shot out from the Underpass like a bullet. From the corner of her eyes she still saw the demon's hands but they appeared different. As the bike slowed down the two hands became limp then fell to her side. She stopped and dropped her bike to the ground and reached at both of her sides and pulled the two ends of her sash in front of her. A sigh of relief filled her body. The corners of her mouth curled up, then a giggle escaped her lips, then she doubled over in a full fit of laughter. Teddy watched from the top of the Underpass, alone, as the other children cheered and congratulated the toughest and bravest girl in school. He had been certain that Ida-Mae would chicken out at the last moment and not himself.

The victor with new found fame, respect, and with the truth of the Underpass inside her, boldly lead the other children down the road and headed to Jenkin's General Store for orange popsicles, Babe Ruth candy bars and some more of old Jake's ghost stories.

Audrey Gray

Brightly colored leaves
showered down
thinning trees

the momentary vision
formed in my mind

wisp of smoke
from the chimney

and afterwards
eyes glowing
the memory
of afterwards

No stop it!

Squash the fleeting thought!

It's gone

forced back
like a slender reed
bent hopelessly
before a storm.

Holly Charpentier

Satur-daze

"Just get up?" he asked, taking off his hat and coat and throwing them onto the nearest chair.

"Ya," I answered, holding my warm coffee mug like a jewel. "There's fresh coffee if you want some."

"Sure, I'll have some," he answered cheerily, pulling up a chair. It squeaked a bit as he settled down, taking the steaming cup of coffee. "What's your plans for today?" he asked, raising his eyebrows, wrinkling his tawny brow.

"Oh, I've got some studying to do, but no other plans, yet," I replied, flopping back onto the stool.

"Well, I was going to cover up a few things before it snows," he said, measuring a teaspoon of sugar. His hand trembled as he stirred in the sugar. He clanged the spoon against the cup. The last drops of coffee rolled into the mug. Crouching forward, raising the mug, he took a sip. Smacking his lips, he exclaimed, "Then, I'm going hunting!" His eyes shone as he reached for a cigarette.

Cocking his head to one side and not fully pronouncing his h's, he explained his plans in his French-Canadian accent. "I 'ave three arrows, it should be enough for me today. Really, I only want to scout around and look for tracks." I never really noticed just how much he rolled his r's when he spoke. "It'll be the first time t'at I'll get out t'is year." He took another sip of coffee. "I've been so busy with our house, with your grandmother's house, and with work. But today, today I'm going hunting. It is a beautiful day for it." Taking a drag off his cigarette, he gazed out of the window.

The sun shone through the window, revealing the cloud of smoke that surrounded us. The aroma of fresh brewed coffee filled the house. It was cozy. No school. No work. And everyone was going hunting. I could see it already; at dusk they'd return and sit around smoking and drinking a few, bragging and laughing, regardless of whether or not they even saw a deer. Then, before you could imagine, they'd all be asleep, exhausted from the miles that they had walked, only to be eager the next morning for more.

He took another drag off of his cigarette, "Where's your brothers?"

"They went up in the fields to target practice."

"Those crazy kids! Couldn't they wait?" He shook his head, reaching for his mug. I knew that he was in a good mood. He works hard enough, it was about time he took a day out for just himself.

He rose, finishing his coffee. "Well, I'll be in the garage, come get me when your brothers come in."

"Okay."

Not much later, I came bounding down the stairs, carrying a laundry basket and in perfect beat with the song on the radio, when I lost my timing. I knew he was here. I could smell the pipe tobacco. I could smell the booze. Entering the kitchen, I pulled out my closet smile.

"Hi, Jim."

"Good morning, is your dad around?"

"Ya., he's in the garage."

"Oh."

I emptied the clothes into the washer, thinking back when I used to like to see Uncle Jim. He used to be my favorite uncle. He was a different man, he

even looked different. He used to be handsome. I guess that he still thought that he was.

The kitchen was filled with sickening sweet, pipe tobacco smoke. I felt suffocated. "I'll go and get my father," I said and escaped out the door.

It was a fresh, crisp day and the smell of oily tools and machines pierced my nostrils as I entered the garage. My father turned with a quick, excited look, "Are the boys back yet?"

"No," I answered, not wanting to break the news.

"What do ya think?" he asked, pointing to the newly put up shelves he had devised.

"Nice," I smiled. He was so proud. I paused. "Papa, Uncle Jim's here."

Slowly, we walked back into the house. Cold from the outdoors, I poured us each a cup of coffee.

"Hi, Jim," said my father.

"Hi! We going hunting today?" he asked, pouring himself the rest of my mother's wine.

"No," my father sighed, taking a drag from his shaky cigarette. "I have some things to do before the snow flies."

YvonneVaillancourt

Lockout 1990

Another contract has expired
And negotiations go on and on

Spring is here but where are the indications?
No crack of the bat
No popping-snap of the glove
No one leaving off of first

Not even the bellowing of the umpire
Only the crisp crunch of skates digging into the ice
and the squeaking of sneakers on the court.
Maybe it still is winter.

Jeff Bigelow

Deceased

the eyes plastered beneath frozen cilia
folded upon themselves
and those corneas staring
in untimely quiet
Your mind holding
its dead shadow
still

and long, flesh-wrapped bones
curled into clasps on a
bloated, lace-bound bodice
Resting.

Irises are in your hair
and tangible products
pinking your overly matte skin
it is poked at the corners
of your dead mouth
without teeth and
the black, bound roots
are hidden.

and you
should be
a stranger

Tammy Armstrong

Your arms are wrapped
tightly
around my back

and my entire body
shivers

I breathe in your scent
and breathe out my tension

Heated sensations dance
around me
settling in my back
my shoulders
my face.

Each and every hair
stands up
in attention

and I am paralyzed.

Right and left don't
exist

Only
Your eyes.

Your ice blue eyes
look deep
deep inside me

What do you see?

Do you see
that I'm celebrating
the present?

and do you know
that I
am your future.

Staring deep
deep into your eyes

I answer my own questions.
Michelle Doiron

The Writer (from Nightvisions)

Another long, gentle winter evening
And here I am
Awake and exhausted
Pacing the living room floor
Feeling the strands from the
Plush, blue shag carpet
Squishing between my toes
Drinking my fifth cup of coffee.
I stop for a while to stare outside
The picture window
Not really looking at anything
Just sort of staring at nothing.
Suddenly I notice it has started to snow
Or maybe it has been snowing
I just didn't notice it until now.
It's really starting to add up out there
The flaky cloudlike puffs of snow
Falling to earth in a storm of passion like
White rain.
It takes me back to days of giving whitewashes
And receiving them
Sledding fast down icy driveways
And freezing your buns off
Snowball fights and angels in the snow
And being wet and cold
And having hot chocolate waiting for
You inside the nice warm house.

The distant rumble of machinery explodes
Like dynamite charges
Jarring me back to this insane world of reality.
The snowplows are coming,
Noisy interrupting my little
World of tranquility.
My paradise,
They ruin it.
Just like everything else in life
Corrupted by commitments and
Deadlines.
They call it progress.
Damn it,
Why do they have to destroy everything beautiful?
Why couldn't they have just let it alone
Let it stay a little while longer?
It's too late
And all I'm left with is the
Brownish slush covering the sides of the road
And the tears

Dripping down the sides of my face
Rolling into my mouth
And the bitter taste of salt.

I ease back into the Lazy Boy recliner
And wash the taste from my mind
With strong liquor.

I guzzle hard and fast
Feeling the burning
All the way down my throat like a
Lit match to gunpowder.
It sits in my stomach
Sending out numbing vibrations
Throughout my body.
The alcohol serves its purpose well
Acting as an eraser
It takes away
All the hurt
All the pain
All the frustration.
Whole pieces of my life disappear
Like magic
And after awhile
I just don't care anymore.

Alone again.
Me and my insomnia.
Four a.m.
Tumbling about in fits
Violently trying to get to sleep.
Sheets and pillow soaked with sweat and
Clinging to my body.
Like sleeping on Plastic Wrap.
Sleeplessness finally sets in
Like a spike driven deep into my brain.
So I sit quietly
Waiting for another day to begin.

Black coffee
The breakfast of the overachievers.
That warm brown mother
She understands me,
Listens to me,
Cradles me in her arms like a baby
Close to bosom
Giving me her love.
I stay up writing my thoughts
Down on paper.
Poems for me, to me, by me.

All just ranting and raving
And babbling on and on
Like a caged hyena.

The clock on the wall
That damned ceaseless ticking
Driving me crazy
Telling me the day will be over
All too soon
Taunting me with time...

Creativity is like a faucet
Sometimes dripping
Endlessly.
Sometimes gushing out in bursts
Of passion.
But mostly the knob is
Turned too tightly
A little too off.
And sometimes you need a goddamned hammer
And chisel to set it in
Motion again.
I don't even have a screwdriver.

dedicated to chris dwyer (wherever you are)
for putting her foot down!!!!

lawrence shepardson

Perfect Love (from Nightvisions)

There are no words to describe how
I want to make love to you
Taking you in my arms.
We melt into each other.
Ripping off our clothes
Tossing them aside like so many
Department store advertisements
That cover up the comics in
The newspaper
We throw ourselves down onto the
King Sized Posture Pedic
Bodies entangled like a crumpled piece of
Plastic Wrap,
Clinging.
We become one.
And I wake up holding you.
The first thing I see is your face next to mine
And I would never let you go.

I would send you a dozen
Plus one
Boxed,
Long stemmed,
Dethorned,
Red roses
Every day.
The card simply,
I miss you, I want you, I need you,
I love you.

Like a man drowning,
Yearning for life, yearning to breathe,
A burning desire for air,
Such is my longing to hold you in my arms
And to feel the warmth of your heart
So very close to mine,
And to curl up within you
Like a moth to a flame,
Like steel to a magnet,
Like the ocean waves licking gently upon a sandy beach.

Like the perfect combination of
Black coffee, sugar and cream
Two parts of a whole
The yin and the yang
Together at last
Like paint on an artist's pallet
Mixing and complimenting each other
Our souls blend together.

We would explore each others bodies
Each time with new eyes,
Each time like it is the first time.
Eyes of wonder, amazement, innocence.
Thoughts and emotions,
The story of the soul
Read in each others eyes
Speech becoming more and more
Impractical.

We would take baths together.
You would wash me,
Then I would wash you.
Hands caressing soft flesh
Like a baker kneading his dough
For a creation of love.
His bread, our passion.

Combing your hair for hours ...
I could brush it all day long,
Forever,
Just to be selfish.
That sweet smell of freshness
I just can't forget
Like flowers,
Fresh cut grass,
Or the clean, pure,
Springlike smell of
Dew rising from the earth
In early morning sunshine.

And not just the smell
But the feel of it
Beyond heaven,
Beyond silk and satin
Like a cloud passing over and through fingers ...
And soon I would forget to brush.

lawrence shepardson

A Shitty Day to Die

It's the final bow; the credits at the end of a reel; like looking in your rear view mirror, and seeing your life fade behind you. So really, for a big moment like this, wouldn't you rather check out on a truly grand day? Maybe the first warm, sunny day of spring, on a clear, crisp autumn morning when the air is so clean that you savor every breath?

But Gary was on the northern plains of Germany, and it had been raining nonstop for the better part of two weeks. The temperature hadn't made it to forty yet, and everything was cold and wet, particularly Gary. It was nothing new, but that didn't make him feel any better. Oh sure, his mind had adapted, and he had long ago stopped noticing the constant shivering, just as he no longer noticed the painful sensation of the flesh rotting off his feet from prolonged trenchfoot.

Maybe you've heard about the body adapting, but most of the time that's just plain back-asswards. It's the mind that adapts, while the body withers, decays, and succumbs to the elements, just as Gary's was doing at the present.

"Take a big gulp, ya lush," Gary muttered to his 'fifty', as he poured thirty-weight oil into its finely machined bowels. Unlike many machineguns, the 'Fifty Cal' isn't finicky, and as long as it's oiled liberally, it will fire. And fire. And fire.

"Sergeant Ramey, get that gun up on position seven, and don't piss away any of my rounds!" barked the commander to Gary. This little scene was more for the benefit of the soldiers in the immediate area than anything else. Gary had always scored expert on any weapon he fired. Today it was just training, but only a few years back, his life, and many others, depended on his expertise in delivering death through the staccato cough of his 'fifty'.

Sgt. Gary Ramey was one of the few Viet Nam vets left in our outfit, and the C.O. knew that this was one soldier whose actions under fire he needn't concern himself with. In fact, the C.O. was more uncertain of his own intestinal fortitude, having never been exposed to combat.

I first met Gary when I was transferred (at my request) from headquarters, where I was a radio operator, to Charlie company, where I was to be a grunt (again, at my request). My previous nine years had been spent with a microphone in my hand more often than a weapon, and I wanted to learn the business end of the Army, as much for my own sense of accomplishment, as to increase my chances for promotion. Let me disgress.

A grunt (known in more respectable circles as an 'infantry soldier' has but one true purpose in life: to seek out and kill — effectively — efficiently — tenaciously, and with extreme prejudice. Every other mission is secondary. The true grunt operates in any weather with whatever he can carry. Often this means a tradeoff between comfort items, and tools of the trade. Let me tell you from experience no grunt worth his calling wants to run out of firepower. So, all too often, food, clothing, and other luxuries are passed up in favor of equipment: ammo, grenades, rockets, demolitions, and other devices to bring carnage when and where needed.

So anyway, the day I showed up at Charlie company, a dress uniform inspection was scheduled, and I arrived impeccably suited for the occasion. The First Sergeant instructed me to assume the squad leader position for the first squad of first platoon (bear with me). The company was already formed up, so I

had to sort of impose myself on the squad. Never one to lack initiative, I strode through the ranks to assume my designated, and (in my opinion) earned position.

But as I approached my honored station, the sergeant occupying my spot stopped me in my tracks. I immediately regained my composure, albeit with some lack of confidence, and moved into my position. What caused such a disturbance were the medals that adorned my 'subordinates' chest. Three Bronze Stars for heroism, and two of those included the "V" device for valor in combat with the enemy.

It was a formal inspection, and this decorated veteran and I stood silent and motionless for close to two hours. The commander inspected me, and finding no faults with my uniform, moved to Sgt. Ramey.

"You were awarded the 'Purple Heart' twice," griped the C.O... "Can you explain why you're not wearing it?"

The tone of the C.O.'s voice was not a question, but a demand. Worse, I had been in charge of this "vet" for all of two hours. Not a word had passed between us, but by Army tradition, I was to account for any shortcomings, period. This never has, and will never be, an area for discussion.

"Sir, I was given that damned award for moving too slow," Gary snapped back. "And I hate to wear all this Bravo-Sierra anyhow, so if you don't like me not wearin' a label that says I'm slow, get another guy. Like this greenhorn who just took my spot."

I wanted to shudder. In fact I probably did. The C.O. just shook his head, but I knew that this vet to my left had me dead in his sights. I never worried about not knowing a job. You stay up, stay at work late, get up early, whatever it takes. You learn better than anybody — then you teach. But today I had been outclassed, and no textbook answer was going to redeem me.

As the inspection ended, Gary asked me over to his house for a beer.

I really wasn't in the mood to be eaten alive for my inexperience, but I didn't really have a reason to say no, so I accepted. It was without a doubt one of the smartest decisions I've ever made.

"So ya think I'm goin' ta F— up yer new job, eh?" Gary stated without a hint of malice.

"How would I know. You're a decorated vet, and I'm supposed to be your squad leader?" I replied with only a little animosity in my voice. I was filled with conflicting emotions, and didn't really know how to handle them. I was supposed to be his boss, yet not only was there nothing I could teach him, but I yearned for him to be my mentor.

It came to be.

He had about a million skills that had kept him alive in 'Nam'. I learned a few. Subtly, he taught me what he knew, never envying me for outranking him. Gary not only taught me the skills of the infantry, more importantly he showed me that he was the most unselfish man I had ever met.

So on that cold, rainy day in Germany he pulled his track beside mine (I was on position 8), and we smoked everything that moved. The competition was, to say the least, intense. Gary had taught me all too well how to smoke the earth with a 'fifty.'

The fifty is a godless gun. It fires a shell about the size of a really big cigar. And it fires about two hundred per minute. In fact, if you're being shot at with a fifty, never hide behind a tree, no matter how big. I can cut down an oak tree with a three foot diameter in about fifteen seconds, and I'm not all that good.

Weapons are said to be rather phallic. If that's the case, the 'nifty fifty' is the incubus of machineguns. It turns a barrel to a glowing, cherry red in about three minutes, and, if you know what you're doing it can decimate targets a half a mile away. By the way, it shoots armor piercing, and armor piercing incendiary rounds. Incendiary means it sets anything it hits on fire. Anything.

Anyway, we were firing side by side from on top of our armored personnel carriers. We were on the third firing sequence, shooting moving targets at a distance of about eight hundred yards. I was on my third barrel, and spent shell casings were piled around me a foot deep. As the saying goes, I was seriously a rockin' and a rollin', oblivious to my surroundings. Until I felt the sting of a hot casing hit my cheek.

I stopped firing and looked to my left at Gary, thinking he was trying to distract me (all firing tables are timed). But he was pointing to the track on his other side. A motionless figure was slumped over the gun. I climbed out of my track, and leapt from mine, across Gary's, to the far vehicle.

Gary was already struggling to extract the soldier from his waist deep position in the track. I grabbed the guy's jacket and helped pull him free. As we laid him out on top of the track, I noticed blood flowing freely from under his rain suit and over his overshoe.

By now, the firing had stopped, and three medics pushed us aside. Furiously, the medics began stripping away his clothes to expose the wound. I still remember thinking that they were too late, as I watched the blood around his feet turn a sickly pink as it mixed with the rain and flowed off the side of the track. I thought it was his life, draining to the ground and seeping into the earth.

It was.

"The round exploded prematurely and the primer casing entered the inside of his thigh, piercing his femoral artery," the commander explained to us that evening. "Unfortunately, he only had a minute or two to live, and the medics did everything possible. He was probably gone when they got there. It's a damned shame to lose a kid like that, but some accidents happen too fast to do anything. That's all. It's terrible, but we don't stop in our tracks. Tomorrow is another day, and our training will go on. Get prepared for it. Dismissed."

Gary and I left to get ready. There was a German bar open, and we went there to get prepared for tomorrow's training. The first two beers went down without a word spoken, then Gary uttered those words I'll never forget. "I checked. The barrel was out forty-seven clicks."

Shocked, I felt the color leave my face as what he said soaked in. Let me share some small technical details with you.

As I mentioned earlier, like most machineguns, the fifty requires frequent barrel changes. As the barrel is screwed into the gun, it makes a clicking sound. The idea is screw the barrel in 'til it stops, back it out two clicks, make some minute adjustments, and you're ready to party. This poor kid's weapon fired when the round was still a good half an inch from being chambered, causing it to explode. Violently, and fatally.

As several more beers lubricated our tongues, we discussed what went wrong, and came to the realization that what had happened was not an accident. It was, at the very least, negligent homicide.

By now Gary was pretty hammered. Normally he's quiet as a churchmouse, but what had happened was really eating him. And with just cause.

"The poor bastard didn't have a chance! Where the f— was his squad leader? That kid had never been near a fifty before today, and you know newbies don't fire that gun without someone who's a qualified expert as a Safety. WHERE THE F— WAS HIS SAFETY!" Gary shouted loud enough to turn heads in an already noisy bar.

"You two had best do a better Goddamn job of playing detective before you come in here running at the mouth. If you think I fell off the apple tree yesterday, you've got another thing coming!" The C.O. shouted at us. It was just shy of four-thirty in the morning, and I'm here to tell it's a terrible time of day to get your ass chewed. "Sgt. Ramey, if you had not messed with that gun, we could have brought in a weapons expert to determine if the gun's headspace was out of tolerance, but as it is, you've pretty much shot that idea to shit. As far as the gun Safety not being there, he was looking for the medics after he noticed that Smith had stopped firing, and appeared unconscious. Now that we've dispensed with all this unsubstantiated bullshit that you two concocted, I caution the two of you to refrain from mentioning what we've discussed here. I warn you, if this accident starts being rumored as an act of negligence, I'll see to it personally that the two of you are preferred for courts-martial charges. Is that clear? Get out of my tent!"

It's the subtle hints that inform you when your welcome has expired. In this case it was the C.O.'s rage contorted face that let us know our visiting hour had long since passed.

"The suckhole's lying through his teeth," Gary muttered as we headed for our tracks. "See you tonight."

On that note we parted company. Gary was scheduled for a patrolling exercise, and I was headed for the 'demo' range. Normally, I lust for demolitions training, because what you can obliterate is limited only by your imagination, and mine is rather creative. However, today my skills, though passable, were lackluster and mediocre. My mind was on the day before, and the questionable circumstances surrounding it. As the day wound to a close, I headed for the "Hofbrauhaus," where I was to meet Gary and talk about this morning's events.

Again, silence permeated our table as we pounded down our first few beers. The worst German beer is without a doubt superior to anything in this country, and that night it tasted particularly chaste. I had drunk more the last two nights than I normally consumed in a week, but somehow it was not bothering me.

"The sonofabitch lied through his teeth. Jeff, I saw that kid firing by himself long before he went tits up. If his Safety was lookin' for a medic, it was because he had a premonition. As far as me touchin' that gun, I've put more rounds through a fifty in one day than you or anybody else will fire in a lifetime. I'm not braggin', but if you know anybody around better with a fifty than me, I'd like to know. I fired about twenty thousand rounds in one day in the "Ah shau," and I know when a barrel's headspace is way the f— off. I saw more good men die in 'Nam than I care to ever remember, but I'm tellin' ya, lettin' a kid get killed on a fifty range over some ignorant bullshit is just as bad, if not worse." As Gary concluded his all too true comments, we again staggered back to our homes, both knowing an "accident" never occurred.

The company had Private Thomas Smith's funeral the next morning. The body wasn't there, of course, but a pair of glass-shined boots with an M-16 stuck bayonet first into the earth behind them was a symbol we all understood., Draped over the buttstock was Smith's helmet. I stared at it as the C.O. spoke many eloquent words on the behalf of a soldier he knew only by name.

Private Smith had been in our unit almost four months. He was eighteen, and had come to us from the Appalachians of West Virginia. His parents had given the Army a fine, hardworking child. In return, they received a coffin decorated with the United States flag. He was promoted to Private First Class, and awarded the Army Achievement medal. Posthumously.

I rather suspect both him, and his parents, would rather he be alive as a plain old private.

Smith's parents were told of their son's death by an officer dressed in finest attire. The officer most assuredly passed on his personal grief (I doubt if he ever met anyone named Smith) at the untimely passing of their son.

The death certificate read "Catastrophic Weapons System Failure," when it should have depicted "Catastrophic Human System Failure."

Gary and I were drinking. Again. The exercise was over, and we were at my house, reminiscing.

"Ya know," I said, "It was a shitty day to die," remembering the cold, wet weather we had endured, and the fact that no one should die on a shitty day in Northern Germany, so far from home.

"I know what ya mean, but don't forget, it didn't have to happen. It was a big screwup, and a newbie died. Now it's an accident, but you and I know different. Don't ever forget it."

Gary's last comment before passing out on my couch will live with me forever.

It was a shitty way to die.

J.V. Kramer

Keith

The phone rang a little bit before eleven on Saturday morning. I knew it would.

"John, you ready?" It was my best friend, Keith.

"Yeah," I said.

"Meet me at the end of the street in about fifteen minutes, okay?"

"Right. Bye."

I finished what little breakfast I had left and rinsed my plate and put it in the sink. Otherwise, my mother would have yelled at me, and that would have wasted time.

"Who was that?" My mother's voice from upstairs. I answered while putting on my sneakers.

"Keith, I'm gonna go to the store for awhile. I'll be back later, alright?"

"Okay. Bye."

I put on my light summer jacket, zipped it up and walked out the door and up the street. As usual, I got to the corner before my friend. To pass the time, I kicked pebbles into the sewer. After a few minutes, I could see him way down the street, walking.

"What's up?" he said when he was within talking distance. A trailer truck was passing us then so I had to yell to answer.

"Not much."

"Let's go," he said smiling.

And there we went, two twelve-year olds on a sunny, windy Saturday morning.

Keith walked alongside me, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his windbreaker. I was always glad to go places with Keith, even though I suppose I was just a little bit jealous of him. He had some sort of charm and a smile that enabled him to talk to any stranger on any subject. I admired that. If a person happened to ask me for something such as directions in town, I would mumble and look away, totally self-conscious and unsure of myself. Not Keith. He could launch into conversation with anyone in a second. It felt good that he was my best friend.

I looked at him. His light, brown hair was being tossed around in the wind. I also admired his looks. While girls weren't exactly a big deal at twelve, I knew Keith easily was ahead of me in that category. His brown eyes had the expression of someone very bored, yet alert. His mouth was a smile, almost a smirk. Keith looked like he was always one step ahead of everyone else. In fact, the whole point of this story, I suppose, is to show the best example of my friend's sharpness, his ability to always be one step ahead.

The incident occurred in the bookstore. Every Saturday we would at least walk down to the mall. Every third Saturday of the month we would always be at the bookstore before noon. Why? Because that's when all the new comic books came in.

We turned onto a narrow path between two old houses. This path led through the woods and eventually to the highway which we had to cross to get to the mall.

"Do you feel like sleeping over tonight?" Keith asked.

"I guess so," I answered. "How much money do you have?"

"We stopped on the path. Keith dug into his jeans and pulled out a dollar and some change.

"Almost two bucks," he said. I had less than half that. I could only afford one comic. We began walking again.

"Are you just getting Spiderman?" I asked, picking up a stick off the ground.

"Probably. I might get a soda in McDonald's after."

We both followed Spiderman like a religion. Keith, however, had a pretty impressive collection of all sorts of titles. He would sometimes buy three or four books at a time. Another reason to be mildly envious of him.

"My mother says we can cook a pizza tonight if we want," he said. "Then we can stay up pretty late."

"Sounds cool."

"Yeah, you wanna know what makes me mad? There aren't any comics about cops. Did you ever notice that?"

I thought about that for a minute. I knew Keith's uncle was a policeman in Boston, but I had never heard him mention any interest in it.

"I guess you're right," I said. "So?"

"Well, I'll bet we could get rich if we started one. We could ask my Uncle Lee for stories and learn all about guns and stuff. Then we could both draw it out. Wanna start tonight?"

It sounded like a great idea to me. Maybe we could get rich, who knows?

"Yeah, sounds cool," I said.

"Decent," he said.

We got to the highway, crossed and walked through the crowded parking lot. The wind picked up in the open, and leaves and paper chased each other around our feet.

Inside the mall, we dodged shoppers and kids while making our way to the bookstore. The Bookshoppe was a fairly small store. One whole wall was full of magazines and racks of paperbacks, and hardcover books ran parallel with this wall. The comic book rack was located in the rear of the store, and we took the same route in the maze of bookracks we always did to get there.

Inside the store were a few adults, two teenage girls at the magazines and the saleslady at the front desk.

And, of course, the priest. Although we couldn't see him yet.

Keith spun the comic book rack around and stopped it abruptly. "It's here," he said.

He took two Spidermans down and handed one to me. I began to glance through it.

"Decent," I muttered.

We skimmed through our copies quickly, suddenly hit with the urge to race home and read them.

"C'mon," I said. "Let's go."

"Okay, in a minute," he said, kneeling down, "I'm gonna look through all these to make sure there are none about cops. I want ours to be the first."

"All right," I said, "but hurry."

Looking around the store, I saw the priest. He was tall with whitish hair, and was standing in front of the bookshelf along the rear wall of the store. It

was the religious section. He was looking through various Bibles, occasionally adjusting his bifocals.

Again, I started to skim through the pages of Spiderman. Keith was busy twirling the rack and going through comics.

"You almost ready?" I asked.

"Yeah, just a second."

I sighed and looked at the cover of my comic book. Spiderman was chained down to the floor of what looked to be a dungeon. Water was pouring in from vents on the walls and filling the room pretty fast. Bad trouble.

Then I looked up at the priest. I saw him glance around and then casually slip a Bible into his black coat. Immediately, he picked up another book and began flipping through it.

I knelt down beside Keith behind the rack. The priest apparently couldn't see us behind it.

"Keith," I whispered.

"What?"

"That priest over there. He just stole a Bible."

Keith stopped looking through comics and stared at me. Then he craned his neck beside the rack to see the priest. He looked at me again.

"Liar," he said.

Whispering frantically, I said, "I'm not lying, Keith! I saw it!"

Keith looked at me and said, "Swear it."

"I do! I swear I just saw that priest steal a Bible!"

Keith grinned. "Really?"

"Yes," I said. I felt better now. I could tell that he believed me. We both leaned away from the comic rack to see the priest looking through books, casual as ever.

"You'd better tell the lady quick," Keith said.

"Me? I don't want to! You tell her."

I started to say something, then stopped. Keith looked at me and said, "You saw him. You should tell on him."

I handed him my comic book. "All right, I will."

I stood halfway up so the priest wouldn't see me.

"Want to come with me?" I asked.

"No, I'll stay here and keep an eye on the priest. You know what? We could probably make this happen in one of our comics."

"Yeah, okay," I said.

I glanced over at the priest one more time before I quickly walked to the front of the store. I had to wait behind a few customers before I finally got up to the desk. I had no idea of what I would say.

The saleslady looked at me. "May I help you?" she said.

Nervously, I rubbed my chin. "No, not really."

"Well, what is it?"

I could feel the sweat at the roots of my hair. I became aware of the piped-in music playing throughout the store. It was sweet and gentle.

"I . . . I just saw a man steal something . . . a book I mean."

She looked at me sharply. "Who?"

"The priest," I said. "He stole a Bible."

She continued to stare at me. "Father Smith?" she asked.

I had no idea if that was his name or not, but I nodded.

The saleslady stared at me for a long time, then she whispered, "I want you and your hoodlum friend out of this store. Now!"

I was shocked. I had been ready to be rewarded and thanked by this lady and here she was kicking me out of the store. I started to get a bit mad.

"Lady," I said loudly enough so that other people in the store looked up. "I'm telling you I saw him. I know you don't believe me because I'm a kid, but it's true." My voice had become softer at the end so the priest wouldn't hear.

The saleslady began, "I don't . . ."

"It's true," Keith's voice from behind me said, "we both saw him."

I looked at my friend in relief and puzzlement. Very quickly he winked.

The saleslady looked like she would explode. "Get out," she hissed.

"No," Keith said. "Here comes the priest. Let's ask him."

I turned around. The priest was walking towards us. He was walking slowly, his head tilted a bit to read the titles of the books he was passing.

As he passed us on the way to the door, Keith stepped in front of him. Startled, the priest stopped.

"Don't . . ." the saleslady began. She was furious. Keith interrupted her, looking squarely at the priest.

"You stole a Bible," he said.

The old priest, stunned, looked at me, then at the saleslady, helplessly. She was looking down, shaking her head.

Keith's gaze never faltered, but the priest's look of bewilderment gradually faded. Remarkably, he began to smile gently. Then he spoke.

"Son, I assure you that are are mistaken. I don't steal, I have no idea why they are accusing me of such a thing." He laughed gently.

"Because I saw you, that's why," I said, surprising myself.

He looked at me, his smile fading. "I'm sorry," he said. "You are mistaken. Goodbye."

He reached for the door and I guess he pushed on it a little too hard because the Bible, a beautiful leather bound Bible, fell from his coat and landed in the doorway halfway in and halfway out.

Nobody said anything for a long time. Not even the other customers who by now had been watching the whole scene. Nobody moved.

The priest froze. After a while he looked around, then at the Bible. He slowly picked it up and brought it to the desk. The door, which he had been holding, swung shut.

"I . . . I . . .," he began. "I intended . . ., of course, I intended to pay . . . for this all along . . ., of course."

He reached in his coat for his wallet. "How much?" he asked the saleslady, who now looked like a statue.

"Didn't I tell you? Didn't I?" Keith said to everyone. "I told you."

I tugged at his sleeve. "C'mon," I whispered. "Let's get out of here."

The priest paid for the Bible, waited for his change, then left, without a word. I went straight for the door, but Keith stopped just long enough to give the saleslady a really ticked off look. She still looked stunned.

"I told you so," he said. Then we left.

Outside the mall, in the sun and wind, I walked quickly. Keith followed. I felt lousy. I felt like crying. I felt like I'd just committed the worst crime. Keith stopped me.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked.

I looked at him and I couldn't believe my eyes. He was smiling.

"What we did in there," I said. "It was wrong. I feel lousy."

His smile became wider. "Why?"

I shook my head. "I don't know."

"Well, I don't know what your problem is, but" — Keith reached into his windbreaker — "this is the best part."

In his hand he had two copies of Spiderman. I stared as he handed one to me. "C'mon, take it," he said.

Always a step ahead, I thought, and I began to smile. I took the comic and began to laugh. Before long we were both standing and laughing in the parking lot as the wind blew leaves and papers around our feet.

Stephen R. Landry

Slippage

She's humming
lullabyes
once again
but no one hears.
the chair creaks
back and forth
moving slowly backwards
inch

by
inch.

Michelle Doiron

I have read it all the books the pages the dialogue the stories the scenes all of them make me sad all of the good ones are taken and the best of them have already been written and their authors snug in their graves or someday will be after the words leave i cannot imagine staying around in this life which wouldn't be much of a life at all without the stories i know did the words come to the great ones more freely than they come to me did they know what i don't know or is it that we are all just pretending pretending that life is more than it really is we live and hope to breed and die and even if we don't breed we die but i sit back to see it all i watch the day the time the girls and boys they are all stories in my mind as i sit here the world around me does not exist only the parts i make up come to life but again i think i've missed the point why did you do it Ernest where have you gone what did you see the days and nights of drinking and fishing your typewriter sadly idle as you knew it would become though you fought the coming of that day what is it that you knew somedays i think i know and others i know i don't and what would you say to me sitting here tapping out this soliloquy would you tell me to tap on or tell me to waste my days in a better fashion would you tell all you knew or would you walk away knowing one day the words would leave me too and better they be mine than yours.

Christopher Woods

